

“Walk by the Spirit”
 Sermon for 22 May 2022
 Texts: Gal. 5:16-24

Rodney King (1965-2012) was “an African American man who was a victim of [police brutality](#). On March 3, 1991, he was beaten by [LAPD](#) officers during his arrest, after a high-speed chase, for driving while intoxicated on the [I-210](#). An uninvolved individual, George Holliday, filmed the incident from his nearby balcony and sent the footage to local news station [KTLA](#).^[2] The footage showed an unarmed King on the ground being beaten after initially evading arrest. The incident was covered by news media around the world and caused a public furor.” The church holds the key to reconciliation and peace.

Within hours of the acquittals (of three of the officers, not the fourth), the [1992 Los Angeles riots](#) began, lasting six days. African-Americans were outraged by the verdicts and began rioting in the streets along with the Latino communities. By the time law enforcement, the [California Army National Guard](#), the [United States Army](#), and the [United States Marine Corps](#) restored order, the riots had resulted in 63 deaths, 2,383 injuries, more than 7,000 fires, damage to 3,100 businesses, and nearly \$1 billion in financial losses. Smaller riots occurred in other U.S. cities such as San Francisco, [Las Vegas](#), Seattle, and as far east as Atlanta and New York City. . . . During the riots, on May 1, 1992,^[54] King made a television appearance pleading for an end to the riots:

I just want to say – you know – can we, can we all get along? Can we, can we get along? Can we stop making it horrible for the older people and the kids?

Today I have an answer for Rodney and it’s affirmative: “Yes, we can get along.” if we are willing to walk by the **law of God**, (Romans 7) to **love one another as Christ has loved us**, (John 13, 15) and **fight the flesh** while we **walk by the Spirit** (Galatians 5:13-26). If we **walk by the flesh**, however, we cannot and will not get along—or have peace.

Let there be peace on earth
 And let it begin with me
 Let There Be Peace on Earth
 The peace that was meant to be

With God as our Father
 Brothers all are we
 Let me walk with my brother
 In perfect harmony.

Let peace begin with me
 Let this be the moment now.

With ev’ry step I take
 Let this be my solemn vow
 To take each moment and live
 Each moment in peace eternally
 Let there be peace on earth
 And let it begin with me

Jill Jackson-Miller circa 1955

What a curious day we live in, thirty-one years after Rodney's plea. Some cities are releasing felons and criminals (even dangerous and violent ones). They are escaping *punishment*. But those we view as our political opponents are not quite so fortunate. Those who disagree with us, some seek to punish and destroy. *What if I were to suggest that this later practice is walking by the flesh?* If we advocate diversity (in theory, as we clamor for freedom of speech theoretically, or ideally), what we actually do when it shows up, politically, is we eagerly suppress it, assault it—we seek to censure, cancel, or destroy diversity of thought. How very odd! The very thing we need: tolerant diversity and what we claim to esteem, or value, we confront, arrest and hustle out of the public square. We punish opinions, but not lawbreakers. I believe that our survival as a nation depends on working out this hypocrisy—and that project begins in the heart, and, the most likely place for that to happen is where the people of God gather—committed to serving the Lord and to loving one another. If you think that is the church setting, and if you can receive it, it is our responsibility to usher in a better day, a day of triumphant peace, we are really on the same page. Let's look into Galatians to see how this unfolds. We will only exposit five verses (16-21) this morning but that will prove sufficient.

We will master one great promise: **Walk by the Spirit, and ye shall not fulfill the lust of the flesh**. And we will receive four comforts: 1. the war against the flesh is the Spirit's war; 2. the **law of God** is in me, **in my mind**; 3. the warfare is normative for believers—it is evidence that we are spiritually alive; and 4. Christ alone supplies us with His perfect righteousness, *we are doing all we can, and all we need to do if we **walk by the Spirit and resist the flesh***.

One doesn't have to dig very deeply into the biography of John Bunyan to discover why Gal. 5:16-24 would speak so profoundly to this great man of faith. There is the fact of his dissolute youth, his violent passions, his lustful pursuits. *He lived by the flesh*, was driven by **the desires of the flesh**. He was profane, vile and vulgar. Paul's concern for the Galatians is that they, after beginning in the Spirit have been seduced into living by the flesh: **Let me ask you one question: Did you receive the Spirit by works of the flesh, or by hearing with faith? . . . having begun by the Spirit** (the same phrase which appears in Gal. 5:16) **are you now being perfected by the flesh?** Paul's point is that there are two drivers in the believer's life—that these drivers are **opposed to each other** (5:17) and that what is at stake here is nothing less than one's sanctification, one's walk with God. It is God who demands that we **be holy** (Lev. 11:44) and it is Jesus who demands that we **be perfect even as our Father in heaven is perfect**. (Matt. 5:48)

This I say then, Walk by the Spirit, and ye shall not fulfill the lust of the flesh. (v.16) ***This is our great promise!*** Paul has not forgotten his teaching on **justification by faith alone** (Gal. 2:16) nor has he backtracked on the summons to mutual love. With this verse, Paul explains himself in saying "By love, serve one another." Martin Luther comments, "When I (Paul) bid you to love one another, this is what I mean and require, **Walk by the Spirit**. I know very well you will not fulfill the Law because you are sinners as long as you shall live. Nevertheless, you should endeavor to walk in/by the spirit, i.e. *fight against the flesh and follow the leads of the Holy Ghost*." Now John Bunyan was so "bibline," it was said of him that if you pricked him anywhere, he would bleed Bible! What we know about Bunyan is that Luther's epochal commentary on Galatians was treasured and revered by him. He took that commentary as a gateway into the true meaning and significance of Galatians. That is sound guidance.

There is great wisdom, comfort and good counsel in Luther's Galatians 5 pastoral commentary—Luther amplifies the pastoral side of the apostle! Luther's interpretation is masterful:

The lust of the flesh is not altogether extinct in us. It rises up again and again and wrestles with the Spirit. No flesh, not even that of the true believer, is so completely under the influence of the Spirit that it will not bite or devour, or at least neglect, **the commandment of love**. At the slightest provocation, there are four spiritual effects:

it flares up,
 demands to be revenged ,
 and hates a neighbor like an enemy,
 or at least does not love him as much as he ought to be loved.

The flesh, remember, one of the two drivers, has four effects: “at the slightest provocation” suggests a worrisome volatility to the flesh. It is like dry tinder eating to be ignited! That is why we have the words under effect #1 “flares up.” ***It is like a brush fire, or a flash bang device!*** The flesh, effect #2 “demands to be revenged” because it is trip-wired to pride. The flesh also #3 hates—it hates a neighbor as an enemy. *It is a consequence of the flesh that we live in deep, constant hostility due to the flesh—from which we need Christ's rescue ; it the flesh is in the driver's seat!* And effect #4, the flesh negates love at the very least. We will not love as we ought to love if we are being driven by our flesh.

The great commandment **to love one another** is hereby honored in Galatians 5 —and it will be accomplished by divine intervention (the Spirit's). Yes, with the exhortation to **walk by the Spirit**, Paul never loses sight of love's supreme priority in the believer's life. And it is noteworthy that the only way to love one another is . . . to **walk by the Spirit**. The phrase **to keep you from doing what you want to do** clearly alludes to this commandment, and not to some lesser, self-directed desire. **You want to love as you ought, obeying the law of God within**, but because you are walking by the flesh, you cannot.

Doing good is love in another guise! ***Walking by the Spirit is fighting for love.***

Here is the key for unlocking one of the most frustrating things about being Christian: *loving as we ought*. The flesh wars against that, and the Spirit wars for it. “Therefore the Apostle establishes this rule of love for the believers. 1. Serve one another in love. 2. Bear the infirmities of your brother. 3. Forgive one another. Without such bearing and forbearing, giving and forgiving, there can be no unity, no peace because *to give and to take offense are unavoidably human.*” (Luther, on v. 16) Remember the Lord's warning: “**It is inevitable that [offenses/scandals] stumbling blocks come, but woe to him through whom they come!** The flesh is divisive, the Spirit is unitive. “Whenever you are angry with your brother for any cause, repress your violent emotions through the Spirit. Bear with his weakness and love him. **He does not cease to be your neighbor or brother because he offended you.** On the contrary, he now more than ever before requires your loving attention.” He now, when you are hurt, offended, irritated and angry, he now ‘requires your loving attention.’ **Loving through the fight honors the Lord's command and our second comfort!** What the Spirit affirms, the flesh vehemently opposes. The flesh urges you to dwell on the offense, justifies the anger and perpetuates the hatred. Nursing the

injury is replaying the same CD disc, resentment is hitting the replay button—forgiving is removing the disc . . . and destroying it. Choose not to hear it anymore—God doesn't.

It is instructive, in light of this, to consider the ***inherent divisiveness*** of the evident works of the flesh rooted in impulsivity: **sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions, envy, drunkenness, orgies, and things like that.** (vv. 19-20) The list is far from exhaustive, and, here, I would draw our attention to two things: the lovelessness of the works of the flesh and how these things put us at odds with one another.

The flesh inhibits, whereas the Spirit exhibits, produces love. **By this they will know that we are Christians, by our love.** (John 13:35)

Yes, these “works” are moral concerns. But more than morality is in view here! It is not enough to assert they are “wrong” which they no doubt are but what is most deadly about them is that **they keep us from doing what we want to do.** . . . which is **loving one another as I have loved you.** (John 13:34 and John 15:12)

The flesh and the Spirit are such bitter opponents that we read in Romans 7:21-25:

21 I find then the [a]¹principle that evil is present in me, the one who wants to do good. 22 For I joyfully concur with the law of God [b]in the inner man, 23 but I see a different law in [c]the members of my body, waging war against the law of my mind and making me a prisoner [d]of the law of sin which is in my members. 24 Wretched man that I am! Who will set me free from [e]the body of this death? 25 Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord! So then, on the one hand I myself with my mind am serving the law of God, but on the other, with my flesh the law of sin.

It is most comforting (Comfort #3) to read of this struggle in Paul's life! And yet that the law of God is within the believer! Some scholars have thought to save Paul the embarrassment of this confession—for it is surely his!—they find it incredible and absurd, assertion that it must Paul speaking for the wicked!, Luther writes. **“But the wicked never complain of inner conflicts, or of the captivity of sin.”** Sin has its unrestricted way with them. This is Paul's very own complaint and the identical complaint of all believers. Paul is tested as was David, and Peter, and James and John—as are you and I!

Our inner conflict is the direct result of the Spirit living in and working on us. It is not social conditioning poor parenting, or some innate characteristic of human nature.

Paul never denied that he felt the lust of the flesh . . . there is no doubt that he quickly suppressed them. *And if at any time he felt angry or impatient, he resisted these feelings by the Spirit.* We are not going to stand by idly and see such a comforting statement as this explained away.” (Luther) Luther believes that some of those who think such diversion is

¹ Footnotes

a. Romans 7:21 Lit *law*

b. Romans 7:22 Or *concerning*

c. Romans 7:23 Lit *my members*

d. Romans 7:23 Lit *in*

e. Romans 7:24 Or *this body of death*

necessary included "The scholastics, monks, and others of their ilk fought only against carnal lust and were proud of a victory which they never obtained. In the meanwhile they harbored within their breasts pride, hatred, disdain, self-trust, contempt." This most properly Protestant complaint would have struck sympathetic chords in the heart of the imprisoned Bunyan.

Against these sins they never fought (this is fair, defeat and abject surrender)
because they never took them for sins.

Here's another comfort (#4): "Christ alone can supply us with perfect righteousness. Therefore we must always believe and always hope in Christ. **Whosoever believeth shall not be ashamed.**" (Rom. 9:33.) Christ supplies! Do not despair if you feel the flesh battling against the Spirit or if you cannot make it behave. For you to follow the guidance of the Spirit in all things without interference on the part of the flesh is impossible. You are doing all you can if you resist the flesh and do not fulfill its demands. Luther relates that he thought himself lost forever, whenever he felt an evil emotion, carnal lust, wrath, hatred or envy . . . then he writes:

"If at that time I had understood this passage, "The flesh lusteth against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh," I could have spared myself many a day of self- torment. I would have said to myself: "Martin, you will never be without sin, for you have flesh. Despair not, but resist the flesh."

Paul's despair was "a God-pleasing despair . . . no true believer trusts in his own righteousness, no man is to despair of salvation just because he is aware of the lust of the flesh. Let him be aware of it so long as he does not yield to it. The passion of lust, wrath, and other vices may shake him, but they are not to get him down." (Luther) To walk by the Spirit and resist the flesh is enough—indeed, it is the best and only thing that we can do. Or, the only things we can do, turns out to be our best, and sufficient enough to please God.

VERSE 18. But if ye be led of the Spirit, ye are not under the law

"Here someone may object: "How come we are not under the law? You yourself say, Paul, that we have the flesh which wars against the Spirit, and brings us into subjection."

But Paul says not to let it trouble us. As long as we are led by the Spirit, and are willing to obey the Spirit who resists the flesh, we are not under the Law. True believers are not under the Law. The Law cannot condemn them although they feel sin and confess it.

Great then is the power of the Spirit. Led by the Spirit, the Law cannot condemn the believer though he commits real sin. For Christ in whom we believe is our righteousness. He is without sin, and the Law cannot accuse Him. As long as we cling to Him we are led by the Spirit and are free from the Law. Even as he teaches

good works, the Apostle does not lose sight of the doctrine of justification, but shows at every turn that it is impossible for us to be justified by works.

These words, "If ye be led of the Spirit, ye are not under the law," are replete with comfort. "It happens at times that anger, hatred, impatience, carnal desire, fear, sorrow, or some other lust of the flesh so overwhelms a man that he cannot shake them off, though he try ever so hard. What should he do? Should he despair? God forbid."

Let him say to himself: "My flesh seems to be on a warpath against the Spirit again. Go to it, flesh, and rage all you want to. But you are not going to have your way. I follow the leading of the Spirit."

When the flesh begins to cut up the only remedy is:

To take the sword of the Spirit, the word of salvation, and fight against the flesh."

Game on.

Amen.